

Sen. Proxmire Shook a Lot of Hands and Touched a Lot of Hearts

By Congressman Ron Kind

Last week, the people of Wisconsin and this nation lost a great public servant, and I lost a good friend and political hero, Senator William Proxmire. Senator Proxmire passed away at the age of 90 after a long, courageous battle against Alzheimer's.

Sen. Proxmire was a great political icon in Wisconsin and a respected leader and independent thinker in the U.S. Senate. I had the great fortune and honor to intern for him after my junior year in college, and I valued his counsel and advice when I became a member of Congress. In my opinion, he epitomized what a good public servant should be: hard working, dedicated, principled and accountable to the people he represented.

Last week, the people of Wisconsin and this nation lost a great public servant, and I lost a good friend and political hero, Senator William Proxmire. Senator Proxmire passed away at the age of 90 after a long, courageous battle against Alzheimer's.

Back home in Wisconsin, Sen. Proxmire was famous for shaking hands and traveling around the state to give people a chance to meet their U.S. Senator. I am still amazed even today when people come up to me to share their favorite Proxmire story. It seems that everyone living in the state of Wisconsin during Sen. Proxmire's years in office had the opportunity to shake his hand at a public event or on their main street.

He did it so well, in fact, that in his last couple election campaigns he spent more money returning campaign contributions than he spent on his entire reelection campaign. He is probably the last person from a past political era who could do that in light of the mud-slinging and attack ads that, unfortunately, exemplify modern campaigns.

Sen. Proxmire was also famous for his monthly 'Golden Fleece Awards' given for the most ridiculous expenditures of taxpayer dollars. As an intern, I had the opportunity to investigate some of those awards. It may not have made Sen. Proxmire the most popular guy in Washington, but it did establish him as one of the greatest stewards of taxpayer dollars that Congress ever had.

Sen. Proxmire also championed ratification of the anti-genocide treaty. He found it unfathomable that the leader of the free world would be one of the last countries to ratify the treaty, rather than one of the first. For 19 years, he delivered a daily speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate about the atrocities of genocide and the need to ratify the treaty, and ultimately he saw the Senate ratify it before his retirement in 1989.

People in Washington viewed Sen. Proxmire as a maverick because he called it the way he saw it. He believed in standing up for the little guy and treating everyone decently and fairly. He believed too, as many of us do today, that there is too much big money in government and too much influence by large special interests affecting the public's agenda. He was a strong advocate for getting the big money out of politics and was a supporter of campaign finance reform.

Sen. Proxmire's legacy will also be defined by his struggle with Alzheimer's disease. His battle with the disease and the tireless work and advocacy of his wife Ellen Proxmire have raised awareness about the devastating impact of Alzheimer's on individuals and their families and the urgent need to find a cure.

Sen. Proxmire blazed the trail for many in public service, including me. He was a thoughtful lawmaker who made policy decisions based on the merits and the impact on the people he represented. I am honored to have had the opportunity to learn from him and hope to carry on his crusade for sound public policy that places the public interest over special interests. That is why, I am proud to call myself a "Proxmire Democrat." May God bless Senator Bill Proxmire and take him into His care.

Congressman Ron Kind is a Democrat representing Wisconsin's Third Congressional District.

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